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15 May '98

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WASHINGTON POST

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Hostages' Release Divides Hezbollah

The latest intelligence reports coming across President Bush's desk give him bad news about the American hostages in Lebanon. It is unlikely that the remaining six will be freed this year.

The recent release of two hostages has set off a volatile feud—even gun battles—between factions of Hezbollah, the umbrella organization that tenuously controls the grab bag of greedy, egotistical terrorists who hold the hostages.

The fighting is between the groups that follow Iranian hard-liner Ali Akbar Mohtashemi and those that line up behind the more flexible Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, Iran's president. Rafsanjani wants to use the hostages to get the United States to return to Iran more than \$1 billion in frozen assets. He also hopes the hostages can be a bartering chip in Iran's bid to join the community of civilized nations.

But Mohtashemi's reporters are die-hard fundamentalists who would rather live in Hell than coexist peacefully with the "Great Satan" on earth.

Rafsanjani thought he had control of the terrorists when he was able to install his functionary, Sheik Subhi Tufeyli, as the secretary-general of Hezbollah in a secret "election" last December. Rafsanjani also had Hezbollah's spiritual leader, Sheik Fadlallah, in his court. But Tufeyli has been unable to win the support of all Hezbollah factions.

It will be difficult for him to get Hezbollah to free any more Americans if the United States, Israel and Kuwait remain unwilling to meet the major

demands of the terrorists, according to Central Intelligence Agency reports.

The CIA has told Bush that the hostages' fate is in the hands of a secret seven-man council inside Hezbollah called the Tabbishi. Even the CIA doesn't know the names of five of the seven.

Bush has been told that the Tabbishi are skittish about publicity and have no qualms about their mission. They call themselves "the hit men."

The top two Tabbishi are linked to the oldest Hezbollah faction, the Islamic Jihad. Its titular leader is Hussein Musawi, a schoolteacher-turned-terrorist who orchestrated the bombing of the U.S. Embassy and Marine barracks in Beirut in 1983.

Islamic Jihad holds hostages Terry Anderson and Thomas Sutherland. The group's chief demand is the release of 15 fellow terrorists and relatives from Kuwaiti jails, but Kuwait has refused.

Other cells of Hezbollah keep their hostages as insurance against an attack by Israel or the United States, or as bartering chips to get Lebanese and Palestinian prisoners out of Israeli jails.

None of that helps Rafsanjani, who simply wants respect and money—Iran's frozen assets and some foreign aid to rebuild the country after the eight-year war with Iraq. Those clear-cut demands are no match for the ego, greed and lust for power that drives Hezbollah and the Tabbishi.

The Tabbishi can't even agree on who is in charge. The No. 2 man is itching to oust the No. 1 man. According to one intelligence report, only their wives' close friendship keeps him from doing it.